



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Presidential Pardon of Prisoners in Azerbaijan

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires Paul W. Jones
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
April 7, 2005

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The United States welcomes Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev's March 23rd decree pardoning 114 prisoners, including 53 individuals considered by the Council of Europe to be political prisoners, and all those jailed after election-related demonstrations in October 2003.

This is an important step toward developing open political dialogue in advance of parliamentary elections in November. We applaud the President's efforts to resolve the question of political prisoners in Azerbaijan, and encourage additional steps to ensure a democratic election in November.

At the same time, we share the concerns of the OSCE Office in Baku, expressed in its March 30 statement regarding the March 29 decision of the Supreme Court of Azerbaijan to uphold previous guilty verdicts on the appeals lodged by seven opposition leaders. These individuals were sentenced for their alleged role in the demonstrations that turned violent surrounding the 2003 Presidential election.

As we have stated previously, the trials of these individuals fell short of OSCE and other international standards. We welcome the release of prisoners, but remain concerned that the government of Azerbaijan appears to have ignored the findings and recommendations of the February report of the OSCE trial monitors.

We urge Azerbaijan's government to build on the momentum generated by the presidential pardons and to implement judicial reform, promote democracy and stability through political dialogue, restore freedom of assembly and freedom of the press, and to respect human rights.

Moreover, we urge the Government of Azerbaijan to conduct transparent parliamentary elections, where the campaign, vote, and ballot-counting process meet international democratic standards and OSCE commitments.

Thank you.